

The International Institute for Middle-East and Balkan Studies (**IFIMES**) in Ljubljana, Slovenia, regularly analyses events in the Middle East and the Balkans. Ambassador **Dr. Jožef Kunič**, member of the IFIMES International Institute and President of the Slovenian Association for International Relations (SDMO) has presented his view of the professionalization of Slovenian diplomacy. His article entitled "**PROFESSIONAL DIPLOMACY: YES OR NO?**" is here published in its entirety.



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## **PROFESSIONAL DIPLOMACY: YES OR NO?**

Already in mid 1990s the diplomats of the independent state of Slovenia undertook the activities aimed at professionalization of Slovenian diplomacy. After the consultation with the then President of the National Assembly Janez Podobnik, a number of professional diplomats assumed the leading positions in Slovenian embassies. However, that was only the beginning of long-lasting efforts. Slovenian diplomacy and even its highest positions were still staffed by people coming from the fields that were not much related to diplomacy, and they were often appointed for only one term of office. There have been about 70 such members of embassy staff appointed for only one term of office who then quit this profession, which is a very high number for Slovenia. Career diplomats were justifiably dissatisfied with the situation. Eventually, the law was amended last year to stipulate that the ambassador may only be a person who is a diplomat, which means that he/she has to be employed at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and have at least seven years of practical experience at that Ministry.

## **A CLOSED SYSTEM**

The regime seems to be exemplary at first glance. It prevents the employment of staff set by politics either as a reward or a way to find a job for them or even in order to keep them away for a certain period of time. The diplomats employed at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Slovenia (MZZ) like to repeat those reasons. But in practice this represents a closed system. Recently a disproportionally large number of employees from MZZ have been promoted to the level of minister plenipotentiary, which is a diplomatic title and a precondition for appointment to an embassy position. Although many of them are high quality staff members, this does not apply to all of them. Slovenia may not afford to prevent those who have proven through their work to be top experts and professionals in the field of diplomacy and foreign policy from applying for an embassy position. Since the new act entered into force the applications for embassy positions may only be made internally and those who are not employed at MZZ can not run for office despite their obvious and practically proven qualifications

The decision has therefore been made to amend the Foreign Affairs Act in order to change the present system and the draft amended act has been submitted for approval to the National Assembly.

It is not surprising that the Trade Union representing MZZ supports the present system. The interest of the employees to have better opportunities for assuming those high positions seems to be more important than the interest for more professionalism and expertism in diplomacy.

Should that be the case, it is not the professionalism that is at stake, but the protection of own interests, since the law stipulates that a diplomat is the person employed at MZZ. Of course, the Trade Union is only carrying out its mission: to protect the employees. It is the politics, i.e. the government and the parliament that should pursue to goal of professionalism and expertism. Unlike the Trade Union which justifiably protects the interests of its members, the politics should strive for the solution that would be in the interest of Slovenia.

It is not a coincidence that professionalism and expertism are defined as the guiding principle in the coalition agreement. While reading the draft texts of the coalition agreement one can not imagine that the highest functions in organisations such as the UN, OSCE, EU, the President's Office as well as universities and associations are not regarded as professional and expert positions.

## **AMENDMENT OF THE ACT**

The closed nature of the system for selecting the candidates to the leading diplomatic positions was the main reason for amending the present act. While amendments

should also improve some other issues, the key issue is professionalization of diplomacy. The act undoubtedly pursues good goals and in the long term the proposed solution will contribute to the professionalization of diplomacy. However, further consideration should be given to transitional provisions, since the proposed solution preserves the present closed system for at least another one year.

During the discussions on the amendments the idea was formed to have 10 % of politically appointed ambassadors, which means up to 5 ambassadors in real terms. This figure has also been included in the draft submitted for approval. This so called "political staff" should fulfil the same conditions as the non-politically appointed employees of MZZ. The demand to meet the same conditions is fully appropriate, since nobody should be appointed to such positions unless he/she is a professional or expert in the field. However, everyone who has proven qualified for such position on the basis of their previous diplomatic experience and long years of professional work in the field of foreign affairs should be enabled, and in some cases even invited, to apply for the embassy positions. Such statutory provision would be of benefit for the professionalism, successfulness and reputation of Slovenian diplomacy. In 2009 the leading positions in Slovenian diplomacy have been occupied by eight so-called non-career ambassadors and in 2010 their number will be reduced to five, so the idea to employ 10% of experts and former diplomats who are not MZZ employees can only be implemented in 2011. Thus the aim of the draft amendment will not be achieved for another two years which puts the rationality of such amendment under question.

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### **THE SENATE INSTEAD OF POLITICAL APPOINTMENT**

This might lead to the idea that there are some diplomacies in the world which have politically appointed ambassadors who are not professionals or experts. This is true, but there are certain reasons for such appointments. Many politicians, as well as businessmen, scientists and others deserved a reward for their work or other activities. In some cases they are rewarded by the ambassador position, although it is clear that the function is actually run by another person in the embassy. Of course such rewarding system would not be appropriate for Slovenia which has relatively small embassies.

On the other hand there are diplomacies which want to use politicians with rich experience and good personal connections, not for operational activities but as deliberating and wise persons. In some countries the senate serves that purpose, therefore they need no political ambassadors. Perhaps Slovenia should consider organising the National Council as an institution in which former presidents of the state, prime ministers, presidents of parliamentary parties, mayors of large cities, foreign ministers etc. would meet. Their experiences are invaluable and instead of being appointed to embassy positions they could participate in the above institution and thus bring benefit to the state of Slovenia. This would probably release the

pressure on embassy positions and increase the importance of the National Council, supported by rich personal connections and experiences.

Nevertheless, Slovenia should enable everyone who have actually (and not only formally) proven through their work that they are experienced professionals and experts to apply for embassy positions. President of the state or minister of foreign affairs (in line with the procedure laid down in the amended act) should then decide which of the candidates are the most appropriate for the function. However, if “political percentages” are to be introduced, 10% would be a too small figure for the first two years of implementation of the amended act, bearing in mind the professionalism, expertism and work experience requirements. The figure may be increased, of course in so far as each “political” candidate fulfils the same conditions as the candidate with the “appropriate background”. Alternatively, the increase may only apply for a transitional period of three or five years. In Slovenia there are well over five (or 10%) experienced professionals who have proven to have better qualities than some persons appointed to embassy positions pursuant to the act. It should be noted that the percentage is not the commitment to be fulfilled by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs but only the ceiling which it may reach in its proposals.

To conclude, the politics should adopt the legal regulation which would bring benefit to Slovenian diplomacy and the state of Slovenia without introducing a certain percentage of non-experts in our diplomacy. It should enable truly experienced experts to apply for the highest diplomatic functions.

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